

Our God Says, "There Is No God Beside Me"

Deuteronomy 32:36-39

by Michael G. Lilienthal

People of the Lord,

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:13). Let us pray:

Most merciful God, as the people of Jerusalem, with palms in their hands, gathered to greet your dearly beloved Son when he came into his Holy City, grant that we may ever hail him as our King and, when he comes again, may go forth to meet him with trusting and steadfast hearts and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.¹

Why did Jesus ride into Jerusalem, when he knew full well that it would lead directly to his death? As found in the lines of Moses' song from the book of Deuteronomy: "For the LORD will vindicate his people / and have compassion on his servants." For this very same reason Jesus rode on, in majesty, toward his death: it was an effort in mercy, an effort to make us realize, as God himself says, "See now that I, even I, am he, / and there is no god beside me." That first line, "I, even I, am he," could also be translated: "I'm it!—I, only I, am *it!*" Period. Done. No two ways about it. God is the only God:

I. He Will Judge

"The LORD will vindicate his people," this says. "Vindicate" here is also the same word for "Judge." He will "judge" his people. He sits as mighty judge in his

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courtroom, and, as in any and every courtroom, there are two sides: the side that declares a “guilty” verdict, and the side that declares “innocent.” God’s work described in this passage by the word “vindicate” encompasses both of these, both guilt and innocence.

It comes first in allowing us to ruin ourselves. Yes, God will “have compassion on his servants,” but not immediately: that compassion doesn’t come until “he sees that their power is gone.” What are people apart from God? Heathens, idolaters, pagans. This song of Moses looks God’s people sharply in the eye and says, “Do you trust God to do what is *his* will? Or do you trust in something else? Do you have other gods? Do you worship the gods of the people around you?” You, do you worship the gods of physical possessions? Do you worship the gods of a conservative political agenda? Do you worship the gods of love for family?

On Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the people followed him because they had heard of his great miracles, and they worshiped him as a political leader, as an earthly king, as one who would liberate them from the oppressive Romans. But little did they know that this was an idol that they had set up before them and dressed it with the face of Jesus. So God is waiting until “he sees that their power is gone.” This means that God will allow these people to come to ruin, to fall to dust, so that “all the rotten props of its might, upon which it has rested, are broken,” and by this judgment “convince his people of the worthlessness of idols and the folly of idolatry,”

so that they can be restored to faith in him.² This means you, too: if you trust in one of those other gods, then God will judge you harshly, and he will wait until those idols have all failed you.

Notice how God mocks these false gods: you are suffering, perhaps you are oppressed by wicked men outside and around you, and God says of you:

Where are their gods,
the rock in which they took refuge,
who ate the fat of their sacrifices
and drank the wine of their drink offering?

Yes, where are those gods? When you come to the end of your life, where is your wealth? Will it help you to extend your life and make it worthwhile? When you are oppressed by your conscience and your sins terrify you, where is your family? Will they save you? God himself mocks you for these false gods: "Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection!"

That should sound familiar. When Jesus was dying on the cross, the chief priests and scribes and elders mocked him, and part of their mockery went: "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him" (Matt. 27:43). A very similar mockery from these enemies of Christ is brought from God to you; but both of these demonstrate the idolatry of people who do not trust in the true God.

The chief priests and scribes and elders trusted not in a God who would win their eternal salvation, but in the god of their works who would deliver them from political dominance. Even as they mock Christ, not realizing that God was in that very

² Keil 1001.

moment in the process of delivering *them*, God mocks them and says, “And what of your gods? Let them deliver *you!*”

But even as he mocks, God’s work of judgment comes also to provide compassion, for “when he sees that [our] power is gone / and there is none remaining, bond or free,” then he will “have compassion on his servants.” When people rely on things other than the true God, then God, in his mercy, will allow those false gods to fail us, so that we can realize how false they are. Our wealth will not save us. Our families may become our enemies. Our preferred political candidate may fail in disgrace. Then comes God’s word of comfort: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me.” God “will be merciful without respect to persons only to those who serve Him, that is, to the remnant of the people converted to Christ.”³ If, instead of mocking Christ on the cross, we hear God’s mockery and therefore look to that cross and see the compassion of a merciful God, then we are saved. All our false props are gone, but there is refuge! God, the only God remains:

II. He Kills and Makes Alive

Does that sound terrible? Wouldn’t you rather set up a god who *only* makes life, not a god of death? That preference itself is the beginning of idolatry, of seeking one who is *other* than the true God, for God’s own Word describes him as one who *both* kills *and* makes alive: “I, even I, am he,” he says, “I kill and I make alive.” Hannah also sang of this true God, “The LORD kills and brings to life; / he brings down to Sheol and raises

³ LW 9:298.

up" (1 Sam. 2:6). Our confessions speak in this way of the work of the Holy Spirit: "His office is not alone to comfort but also to rebuke, as it is written, 'When the Holy Spirit shall come, he will convince the world (to which the Old Adam belongs) of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.'"⁴ This is the work accomplished through both Law and Gospel, as these confessions continue:

Sin is everything that is contrary to the law of God, and St. Paul says, 'All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof.' But to reprove is the real function of the law. As often, therefore, as Christians trip, they are rebuked through the Spirit of God out of the law. But the same Spirit raises them up again and comforts them with the preaching of the holy Gospel.⁵

The Law is God's mockery of our false gods. He says also, "I wound and I heal." He wounds us by mocking us; he wounds us by allowing those false gods to fail us; he kills us by damning us when we sin. But then he also heals and makes alive: this is the Gospel: for Christ took the punishment for our sins; he was damned, so that we are saved! for our true God can never fail us; he was defeated, so that we have the victory! for our God defeats all mockery; he was mocked, so that we are glorified!

Hear this ultimate statement from this one-and-only God: "and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." When you hear that, first, you should be very afraid.

Hear this text once again, including one passage previous:

Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time will come when their foot shall slip;
for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly.

⁴ FC SD, VI, 12, (Tappert).

⁵ FC SD, VI, 13-14.

For the LORD will [judge] his people
 and have compassion on his servants,
 when he sees that their power is gone
 and there is none remaining, bond or free.
 Then he will say, 'Where are their gods,
 the rock in which they took refuge,
 who ate the fat of their sacrifices
 and drank the wine of their drink offering?
 Let them rise up and help you;
 let them be your protection!
 See now that I, even I, am he,
 And there is no god beside me;
 I kill and I make alive;
 I wound and I heal;
 And there is none that can deliver out of my hand.
 (Deut. 32:35-39)

The writer to the Hebrews quotes portions of this long passage, its beginning and end, and look at how he understands the Lord's hand: he writes, "For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'" *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Heb. 10:30-31). Yes, if we stand in God's wrathful hand, the hand which must wreak vengeance and bring judgment, there is no escape. "There is *none* that can deliver out of my hand." This first means, "If you are in the hand of the Lord, no one can rescue you from it!"

But it is also a source of immense comfort, for understand the hand of the Lord as Jesus explains it: "I give [my followers] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). If we turn from all those false props, false gods, false hopes, and turn instead for safety to the voice of our Lord and are therefore protected in his merciful hand, the

hand which comforts, *there is no power in the universe that can snatch you out of it and to your own destruction.*

So how do we flee the wrathful hand and instead come to the comforting hand? Hear this: prophesying about Jesus the Messiah, Isaiah sang, "the LORD has laid on him / the iniquity of us all," and "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; / he has put him to grief" (Is. 53:6, 10). God's wrathful hand has been totally and completely unleashed upon Jesus Christ for us. He took that eternal punishment entirely upon himself. Therefore, Jesus was also raised to life again; and when he ascended into heaven, how does Scripture describe his position? "So the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). Jesus is now at God's hand, and as Paul writes, "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). Remember, God's judgment comes, and it will either condemn or save: but if Jesus is there at God's hand, interceding for us, speaking on our behalf, then he holds God's judgment of condemnation back, because he has already died and taken that punishment, and instead moves God's hand to our protection. It is by faith in this work of Christ that this salvation becomes ours.

Hear again this last verse:

See now that I, even I, am he,
And there is no god beside me;
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
And there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

God desperately wants us to see the clear divide: either we have God, or we have no god, no power, and no defense; therefore we are either in God's hand for wrath, for destruction, for damnation, or we are in his hand for our defense and salvation, where he protects us, on account of Christ Jesus who died.

When you hail your God with loud "Hosannas," be certain that this God is not one of your own devising, not a god of some ethereal "love" concept, not a god of politics or family, not a god of wealth or material possessions or earthly respect; this is an even greater God: the God who saved us from eternal damnation for eternal salvation, the solid rock upon which we can be founded through all storms of nature and of warfare, the only God, beside whom there is no other.

Amen.